

HOUSEBOAT LA DUCHESSE  
The Antique Boat Museum  
Clayton  
Jefferson County  
New York

HAER NY-338  
NY-338

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## HOUSEBOAT LA DUCHESSE

HAER No. NY-338

LOCATION: The Antique Boat Museum, Clayton, Jefferson County, New York

PRESENT OWNER: Antique Boat Museum

PRESENT USE: Museum exhibit

SIGNIFICANCE: Built in 1903 for George Boldt, whose biography is a rags-to-riches story of a Prussian immigrant who came to the United States and became a wealthy businessman, LA DUCHESSE survives as a luxurious houseboat exemplifying the Gilded Age.

HISTORIAN: Compiled by Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, 2007

PROJECT  
INFORMATION: The documentation of LA DUCHESSE was undertaken through a partnership between the National Park Service's Historic American Engineering Record (Richard O'Connor, Acting Chief) and the Antique Boat Museum (John MacLean, Executive Director). Todd Croteau served as HAER Project Leader, delineator, and photographer. John Summers (Chief Curator), Jessica Hougen (Asst. Registrar), and Lora Nadolski (Education Program Coordinator) supported the project with archival documents and editing.

## PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History

1. Date of Construction: 1903
2. Architect: Tams, Lemoine & Crane, New York City
3. Original Plans: Extant sketches of LA DUCHESSE show that half of the upper deck was a “dancing deck.” Aft of the deck was the parlor, which featured a bay whose ceiling contained a leaded stained glass window. On the aft wall of the parlor was a green marble fireplace with brass decorative details. The 17.6’ x 18’ parlor had a door leading to a hallway that accessed owner George Boldt’s suite. Off the hallway were bathrooms and washrooms, including one designated for women. A flight of stairs led to the main deck. The hallway ended at Mr. Boldt’s den to the right, measuring 10.4’ x 13.2’, off of which was his bedroom, measuring 7’ x 7.6’. Another door to the left at the end of the hallway opened to the 7.2’ x 17’ smoking room.

The main deck contained the service area (aft) and guest rooms (forward). The accommodations for the servants were part of the service area and included two 7’ x 8.6’ bedrooms for the servants, a dining room at 8’ x 11.6’, and a water closet. To provide for the dining needs of the guests aboard LA DUCHESSE, servants cooked in an 8.2’ x 18.6’ kitchen, and food was stored in a pantry measuring 8.6’ x 6’. The kitchen area included two ice boxes and a wine room. Adjacent to the service area was the 15’ x 20’ dining room, featuring a fireplace with a brass surround embellished with cast sea shells and Admiralty dolphins. Forward of the dining room were seven guest cabins, with one reserved for the maid, ranging from 7’ x 8.6’ to 8.6’ x 10.6’. The guests shared three bathrooms and one additional toilet.<sup>1</sup>

When completed, LA DUCHESSE cost \$175,000 to construct. She measured 104’ long, 22’ wide, with a 4.3’ deep mahogany hull. Her net tonnage was 247.

In 1918, an advertisement for renting LA DUCHESSE in *Town & Country* magazine stated: “The magnificent houseboat LA DUCHESSE...has steel bulkheads, steam heat, open fireplaces, ten bedrooms, five baths, fine servant’s quarters, dining room, salon, and dancing deck. It is fully equipped and furnished, including silver, glass, and linen.”

4. Alterations & Additions: In September 1943, broken water pipes caused LA DUCHESSE to sink in her slip at the Yacht House of Boldt Castle, where she was docked. A *Thousand Islands Sun* article by Perry Hazlewood dating from

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<sup>1</sup> See field records accompanying this documentation for a copy of the original LA DUCHESSE plans.

October 7, 1943 reported that “the handsomely finished woodwork has been discolored by water and where veneer was used, the surface has been warped.” A diver repaired the punctures from the two piles that pierced the houseboat when it sank, and it was towed to new owner Andrew McNally’s property on Wellesley Island.

Repairs and alterations took place throughout 1946-47 when architect Albert Skinner oversaw work on LA DUCHESSE at Canadian Dredge and Dock in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Much of the work was to repair the damage caused by the sinking, including installing new plumbing and septic tanks, new wiring, new partitions in the service area, and new counters and cupboards in the kitchen. The woodwork on the main deck was bleached to hide water stains and replaced in the dining room with v-joint tongue and groove pine instead of mahogany. Some cupboards and cabinets were rearranged, and the stairway from the main deck to the master suite was straightened. The master suite was also reconfigured so that the den and smoking room became one large bedroom and the room that previously served as the bedroom became the study. In December 1947, the Pullman shades were sent to the company in Chicago to be redone.

The flat roof may have been replaced in 1954 with a cambered one.

A major alteration of LA DUCHESSE occurred in 1956-57 when a steel hull replaced the original wood one. Glen Furness, Vice President of Hutchinson’s Boat Works Inc., designed the steel hull, which cost \$52,452.51.

- B. Historical Information: George Boldt, who commissioned the construction of LA DUCHESSE, was a wealthy businessman who managed the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City and owned the Bellevue Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia. In 1900, he began construction of a mansion on Heart (Hart) Island in the Thousand Islands region that was to be a replica of a Rhineland castle for his wife. The Thousand Islands area became a summer resort for the wealthy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a popular recreational boating site. Boldt’s wife died in 1904, reportedly causing him to stop work on the castle.

LA DUCHESSE was constructed in pieces in New York City after it was determined that the houseboat would not fit under the bridges of the Erie Barge Canal. The pieces were then sent by rail, and the boat was assembled at Boldt Castle. In 1916, Boldt died, and LA DUCHESSE was offered for rental. In 1922, E.J. Noble (co-founder of Life Savers candy company and founder of the American Broadcasting Company) and Alfred Graham Miles (husband of Louise Clover Boldt, George’s daughter) purchased the Boldt estate, including LA DUCHESSE.

LA DUCHESSE was left abandoned and neglected for several years in a slip at the Yacht House of Boldt Castle. In 1943, Andrew McNally III, who became president of Rand McNally & Company in 1948, purchased the sunken LA DUCHESSE and made the necessary repairs. She then became a summer home for the McNallys. After Mr. McNally's death in 2001, the Antique Boat Museum assumed full ownership of LA DUCHESSE in 2003.

## PART II: STRUCTURAL/DESIGN INFORMATION

- A. General Description: LA DUCHESSE is a steel hulled houseboat. The barge measures 106'-9" long while the house portion measures 90'-10" long. The beam of the barge is 26' while the beam of the house is 21'-2". The upper deck has a lounge deck forward and a master suite aft with a parlor separating the two. The master suite consists of a bedroom, bathroom, and study. A flight of stairs leads down to the main deck, where the staff quarters and kitchen are located aft. The dining room separates the service area from the bedrooms and bathrooms. The former maid's bedroom is now a linen closet. The original fireplaces in the parlor and dining room, and the leaded, stained glass window and gold leaf stencils in the parlor are still extant. A white mahogany Steinway piano, an original furnishing, has been returned to the parlor.
- B. Site Information: The houseboat is currently moored at the Antique Boat Museum where it is protected in a Yacht House, recently constructed in 2006-07.

## PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Information in this report came from a chronology of the history of LA DUCHESSE compiled by the Antique Boat Museum (using the archival collection in their holdings) and from Kathleen Quigley, "River of Dreams: The Queen of the St. Lawrence River Opens as a Museum," July 1, 2005, from Preservation Online, the online magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, available at [http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arch\\_story/070105p.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org/magazine/archives/arch_story/070105p.htm).